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Highland Park students question McCollum on issues facing nation

BY JOHN WELBES
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A lesson in politics

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With Election Day a little more than six weeks away, about 200 Highland Park High School students sat down with 4th District Rep. Betty McCollum on Thursday to talk about everything from the likelihood of a military draft to crowded classrooms.

The students, enrolled in several social studies classes at the St. Paul school, strode up to microphones in the auditorium for the better part of an hour to query the congresswoman from St. Paul.

The war in Iraq and homeland security were popular topics, and Josh Lewis, a junior, asked McCollum, "Would you give up liberty for security?"

McCollum, who voted against going to war with Iraq and has visited the country twice, responded by asking the students to consider "What are we willing to give up?" She talked about seemingly innocuous circumstances that can get a person on a federal "watch list" and some of the more tangible dangers tied to the availability of assault weapons.

"I think a lot of the kids unable to vote don't pay much attention" to current events, said Alex Delgado, a senior at the St. Paul high school, who expressed regret that her 18th birthday falls four days after the Nov. 2 elections. But she said she's been more attuned to news events this year. When she got a chance, she asked McCollum where she stands on mandatory minimum sentences for those convicted of certain crimes.

"I believe we have judges for a reason and juries for a reason," McCollum answered, touching on the harsher sentences for crack cocaine-related offenses, compared with other forms of cocaine. She said she doesn't support mandatory sentences.

The audience in Highland Park's auditorium ranged from freshmen to seniors. Only a few hands went up when McCollum asked how many would be eligible to vote on Nov. 2. But students said they were aware that McCollum, a Democrat, is in the midst of campaigning for re-election this fall, and she reminded them during her introductory remarks.

McCollum, a native of South St. Paul, was first elected to Congress in 2000. She meets regularly with students in forums similar to the one at Highland Park.

Rob Kaiser-Schatzlein, a junior, asked McCollum about the changing political landscape in Minnesota and whether it seems to be less liberal.

McCollum said on the face of it, yes, Minnesota has seen a shift.

There are more Republicans from Minnesota serving in the U.S. House; the U.S. Senate seats are split, and the Minnesota House of Representatives is "very Republican," she said. The state Senate is closely split, though it retains a Democratic edge, she added.

But she also pointed out that the state is known for its progressive streak, with initiatives such as Minnesota Care to help people without health insurance, and a history of investing in K-12 education and colleges and universities. She told the students that many of their parents likely work for companies that located in Minnesota in large part because of the state's strong schools and higher education institutions and "because we have smart, bright workers."

But that excellence is threatened, she said, by continued budget cuts and the skyrocketing tuition that results.

"I think we'll see some change with this election," she said, because people see a need for more money for education.

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